

Update on the Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Program

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The Orange-bellied Parrot Recovery Team held their annual meeting in Hobart in early April 2011. The meeting was an opportunity to discuss how the wild population fared through the breeding season, review progress of work on the Action Plan priorities, and to decide what the priority activities will be for winter 2011. The Recovery Team is heartened by the observed stability in the population between December 2009 and December 2010, a productive breeding season in summer 2010/11, and a successful program to collect much-needed founders for the captive breeding program.

Breeding in the wild population

The 2010/11 breeding season was productive for the only known wild breeding population at Melaleuca. At least 21 adults arrived in spring, which compares favourably with a minimum of 23 adults arriving the previous spring. Encouragingly, it appears that 100% of females at Melaleuca participated in breeding, an important improvement from recent years of low breeding participation.

Four nests were found in nest boxes, and intensive nest searches in November identified four other potential nesting areas in natural nesting habitat. Eleven nestlings were banded from the four broods in nest boxes. One brood had partially fledged before the visit to band nestlings so only the one remaining chick could be banded in the nest. At least 16 unbanded juveniles appeared at the feed table. The minimum number of juveniles produced at Melaleuca in 2011 is therefore 27. This is an improvement over the previous breeding season when only 13 juveniles are known to have fledged.

The table below outlines the number of birds known to be alive at the start of the 2010/11 breeding season, the number of young produced, and the known or presumed fate of these birds. Three adult females were banded during the summer.

	Spring arrivals	Known to breed	Young produced	Juveniles captured	Juveniles presumed lost to predators	Presumed to have migrated
Adult Males	9 banded 5+ unbanded	8				9 banded 5+ unbanded
Adult Females	3 banded 4 +unbanded	8				6 banded 1+ unbanded
Juveniles			11 banded 16+ unbanded	7 banded 14 unbanded	2 banded	2 banded 2 unbanded

Founder collection for the captive breeding program

Collection of new birds, or 'founders' for the captive population was a priority this summer. The new birds will add much-needed genetic variation to the existing captive breeding program.

The Recovery Team determined that this summer was the best opportunity to collect the new founders. Twenty-one juveniles were collected at the feed table between late January and late March. The new founders include seven banded juveniles from nest boxes and 14 unbanded juveniles. One unbanded juvenile died in captivity in the first weeks after capture. The post mortem indicated that the bird had a lung infection and had suffered head trauma. The remaining founders are doing well. Genetic analyses in the coming months will establish the relatedness of the birds, and inform future founder collection decisions.

As we were unable to band all birds at Melaleuca, we will be unable to determine whether unbanded birds observed on the mainland are related to those already captured. The unknown genetic value of these unbanded birds, combined with the low likelihood of successful capture, has led to a decision to abandon attempts to capture founders on the mainland this winter.

Habitat management in Tasmania

Recovery Team members who visited Melaleuca after the meeting were excited to see an important planned burn in potential Orange-bellied Parrot feeding habitat in southwest Tasmania. The Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service have since completed planned burns at Towterer Creek, Elliot Hill, Rowita Plains, Birchs Inlet, and Melaleuca Lagoon. The burns will reduce the risk of large wildfires adversely affecting natural values in the southwest, and improve Orange-bellied Parrot feeding habitat. Planned burns to maintain suitable feeding habitat has been a high priority for the recovery program for many years, and is a very high priority under the Action Plan. The Recovery Team are interested to see how the birds respond to this habitat management in the breeding seasons to come.

Priorities for winter 2011

The winter monitoring program remains an important measure of how the wild population of OBPs is faring. Regional Coordinators and volunteers will be continuing to search habitat in South Australia and Victoria to locate over-wintering birds.

When OBPs are located, Regional Coordinators will make arrangements to supply supplementary food to the birds, with the aim of improving their food uptake over the winter period. Supplementary feeding of birds with specially selected seed aims to improve the condition of birds to enhance over-winter survival and encourage high rates of breeding participation next summer. Continuing high breeding participation is required for the wild OBP population to increase.